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Article

Doing Sensitive Research Sensitively: Ethical and Methodological Issues in Researching Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

Complex ethical and methodological issues can sometimes arise when conducting research into sensitive topics. By employing an autobiographic approach to explore the personal dilemmas that arose for the author while undertaking doctoral research on workplace bullying in Irish education, this article highlights potential difficulties and tensions which may arise for researchers (particularly those at the beginning of their careers) when conducting sensitive research. Specific attention is paid to the importance of protecting the researcher from harm, the exiting of the research relationship in an appropriate manner, and the necessity of anticipating potential problems before they become manifest.

Keywords: sensitive research, workplace bullying, teachers, ethics, research relationship, interviews, autobiography

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Workplace Bullying: An Evolving Area of Inquiry

Scandinavian scholars were some of the first to describe the impact and prevalence of negative interpersonal interaction at work (e.g., Leymann, 1990; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). In recent years the topic of adult-to-adult bullying in the workplace has received increasing attention as researchers and policy-makers endeavour to understand this complex phenomenon (Fahie, 2013; Fahie & Devine, 2012; Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vaartia, 2011). The growing body of diverse literature on the subject consistently highlights the profound consequences of workplace bullying for the target(s) of such behaviour; the impact of which may manifest itself psychologically (Gadit & Mugford, 2008) and/or physically (Hogh, Gemzoe Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011). Furthermore, research indicates that the effects of workplace bullying transcend the personal realm, and may also negatively affect the efficiency and integrity of the organisation in which the work-based incivility is sited (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2011; Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011).

Although the focus of many earlier studies was predominantly, though not exclusively, quantitative in nature (e.g., Hubert & van Veldhoven, 2001; Zapf, Knortz, & Kulla, 1996), there has been a progressive broadening of the community of researchers interested in investigating this sensitive topic, with a commensurate diversity of approaches and methodologies employed to study the problem (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). In this context, qualitative interviews are regularly employed to provide the “thick description” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) and richness of detail that facilitates the provision of a voice for those—like targets of workplace bullying—whose perspectives and personal histories have received limited focus in the past (Bryant, 2006; Mallozzi, 2009).

Interviewing people in a respectful and sensitive manner regarding their experiences of distressing and traumatic incidents such as workplace bullying can prove challenging, however, both for the interviewer and the interviewee (Lipscomb, 2010; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). Moreover, the interviewer must skilfully and diplomatically negotiate the, often, complex power dynamics which (in)form the interviewer/interviewee relationship (Mertens, 2010; Paechter, 1998; Sollund, 2008). Taking research in the field of workplace bullying as an exemplar of sensitive research, this article seeks to examine the challenges faced by researchers, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, as they endeavour to navigate around these challenging ethical and methodological issues in a professional and honourable manner. While much research has been devoted to the vulnerability of the researched, in this article particular reference is made to the potential for distress among researchers when investigating topics which are, in themselves, inherently emotional (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2008; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007) as well as the implications this has for universities and research supervisors/mentors (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003).

A Sensitive Subject?

Although there has been some questioning as to the precise definition of “sensitive” research (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2011), it has previously been described as research which “potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or the dissemination of research data” (Lee & Renzetti, 1990, p. 512). Central to Lee and Renzetti’s (1990) seminal definition is the reciprocity of potential risk for all parties involved. This

concept is reflected in later studies which highlight the potential for harm (Corbin & Morse, 2003), as well as the ethical issues involved in researching such topics (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005; McGarry, 2010). Though any subject matter has the potential to be(come) “sensitive” (Hughes, 2004), examples of recent scholarship in the area, which fall within the definitional parameters as outlined above, include studies of domestic violence (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005), political activism (Possick, 2009), homicide and rape (Sollund, 2008), mental health (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008), death (Lipscomb, 2010), traumatic childbirth (Elmir et al., 2011), murder and abortion (Goodrum & Keys, 2007), and sexual health (Walls, Parahoo, Fleming, & McCaughan, 2010). While recognising that the research process itself, and the disclosure it implies, can prove beneficial or cathartic for some interviewees (Davies & Gannon, 2006), nonetheless investigating topics which are considered sensitive can pose considerable challenges for all researchers (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Lipscomb, 2010), particularly inexperienced ones (Bloor et al., 2008; Johnson, 2008). As argued by Doloriert and Sambrook (2009), these challenges may, by their very nature, prove to be both methodological (e.g., sample size and access, research design, appropriate questioning, the accurate and “truthful” representation of voice) and/or ethical (e.g., informed consent, institutional ethical approval, the inherent power disparity between the parties and the interviewer/interviewee relationship itself).

This article highlights the unexpected challenges I experienced while undertaking doctoral research on workplace bullying amongst primary school teachers in Ireland (Fahie, 2010). During and after the research process a number of unforeseen ethical and methodological issues emerged, which caused me to question my positionality as researcher. The inherent tensions in the establishment, maintenance, and cessation of the interviewer/interviewee relationship; the duty of care which the researcher has towards him/herself; and the role of training/mentoring for all researchers—particularly for those at the beginning of their careers—all emerged as key issues for me. These are the focus of this article.

The Study

Having first received full ethical approval from my university, I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who work, or have worked, as primary school teachers and who consider themselves to have been targets of workplace bullying (for further details see Fahie, 2013; Fahie & Devine, 2012). Addressing a lacuna in qualitative research relating to workplace bullying amongst Irish educational professionals, the study aimed to identify the bullying behaviours experienced and to consider the social, economic, psychological, and physical impact of these behaviours. The research revealed the deep trauma, and long-lasting impact, of workplace bullying on each of the interviewees and highlighted the critical role of organisational cultures and systems in the development, maintenance, and resolution of workplace bullying disputes.

Qualitative research methods are particularly suitable for research into sensitive research issues in general (Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Devine 2013) and workplace bullying in particular (Perry, Thurston, & Greene, 2004; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). In this context, 24 individual in-depth interviews were conducted for this study. Potential interviewees had been invited to participate in the research following the publication of a series of articles I had written for the nationally distributed teacher union magazine *InTouch*. This initiative generated a self-selected sample which consisted of a mix of class-teachers, school principals, and retired members of the profession. The final sample ranged in age from mid-twenties to late sixties. Reflecting (broadly) the national demographic profile of the teaching profession (Drudy, 2009), there was a gender split of 20:4, female to male. Given the ongoing debate regarding definitions of workplace bullying (Keashly & Jagatic, 2011), no excluding criteria were applied, except that participants considered that they had been the targets of ongoing campaigns of bullying and harassment in their respective schools. A semi-structured interview framework was employed, thus allowing for, and

encouraging, interviewees to be fully participative in the interview process (Elliott, 2005), raising issues that were considered to be pertinent (Dawson, 2009) and, as observed by Davies and Gannon (2006), giving clues as to their subjective view of the world. These interviews lasted between one and a half and four hours and were conducted in a variety of spaces including hotels, restaurants, and the interviewees' homes. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Over three hundred pages of data were generated during the course of the interviews.

Contemporaneous field notes were compiled during the interviews. These recorded my own personal reflections, as well as my attempts to understand/rationalise the tensions and discomfort that some of the interviews and, indeed, interviewees evoked. The field notes were subsequently transcribed, and the resulting raw data thematically analysed and examined. This process allowed me to both revisit and re-experience the original, deeply inscribed experiences, while writing "from the body, not telling the story how it should be told, but as it is lodged in the body" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 10). In so doing, highlighting the profoundly personal, reflexive nature of my research journey. After each interview, participants were provided with the contact details of free counselling/support services available to them as Department of Education and Skills employees. They were encouraged to contact these bodies directly should they wish to avail of their assistance.

Autobiography: Excavating the Self

An autobiographical, self-reflexive framework was deemed particularly appropriate to facilitate the retrospective examination of my personal experiences in light of the particular dynamics of interaction which occurred during, and after, the data-gathering stage of my research. The self-conscious reflexivity that is integral to this approach encourages personal transformation through the re-evaluation of experiences, which leads in this case, to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interpersonal dynamics and relations of power which shape the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Mertens, 2010; Ramsay, 2004). Critically, it also invites the reader into this participatory relationship, and the researcher is encouraged to "look inward, studying himself or herself to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers of the piece" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 852). The researcher's own voice is at the centre of this type of research which, in itself, offers an alternative manner through which to construct meaning and knowledge (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Mitra, 2010). Autobiographical, self-reflexive approaches have been used before for general educational research (Mertens, 2010) and research into workplace bullying (Vickers, 2007), but they also allow the researcher to "indicate an awareness of the identity, or self ... within the research process" (Elliott, 2005, p. 153), thus promoting a level of structured introspection which may be undertaken in order to understand and, ultimately, improve practice and understanding (Bernauer, 2012). As a teacher with almost 20 years, my professional experience afforded me a particular insight into the complex personal and professional relationships that operate within schools. Although advantageous for this study in terms of initial empathy building and sample access, an "insider status" can, however, prove problematic specifically in the context of the tension which can arise as the researcher attempts to negotiate his/her positionality as detached researcher and professional colleague (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Humphreys (2005) has argued that autobiographical vignettes, in particular, can be employed effectively to highlight commonalities/similarities (with)in people's lives. By so doing, the universality of the experience is revealed, so that "the researcher can explicitly question and highlight pertinent thoughts and emotional experiences" (p. 853). In this context, four vignettes are offered below as autobiographical exemplars that, by articulating my internal reflexive dialogue, serve to highlight the personal and professional dilemmas I faced while conducting this research. Critically, each of these vignettes highlights the centrality of interpersonal relational ethics in all research relationships and draws attention to the fundamental moral principle that researchers must always endeavour "to act from our hearts

and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bond to others and take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (Ellis, 2007, p. 3)

Vignette 1: Exiting the Researcher/Interviewee Relationship

Diane (all names, and some identifying details, have been changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants) was particularly anxious to recount her experiences of workplace bullying at the school in which she worked. During the course of her interview she detailed a dramatic sequence of events, culminating in her being physically attacked by her alleged bully. The interview lasted just under an hour and a half and was one of the shortest of all the 24 conducted. Following the interview, Diane drove me back to the station and thanked me for letting her tell her story. I said goodbye, feeling satisfied that another interview was completed and that I could soon progress to the analysis of the transcript. In my mind, this was to be the last contact I would have with Diane.

However, following her interview, Diane began to telephone me on, at least, a weekly basis. These calls could come at any hour of the day and would last up to 40 minutes. They came on weekends, bank holidays, and school holidays. The formula for each was the same; they began with “Wait ‘til I tell you what happened now...” and she would go on to detail some, mostly, minor incident that had happened that day or in the recent past. Over the course of the calls she would speak tangentially about unrelated topics such as politics, religion, and stories from her past. I never knowingly encouraged this communication, and I would contribute little by way of prompts or non-verbal affirmation. Throughout most of these conversations I would remain silent, seeking only to encourage her to contact the trade union and/or the free counselling service offered by the Department of Education. Her telephone number was “withheld” and I had no way of knowing who was calling until I answered my phone. However, when she then began telephoning me from her mobile telephone (up until that point she had been using a landline), her number was displayed and I could then begin to screen the calls. In total, Diane telephoned me approximately 40-50 times over the course of a year.

At the time, I felt quite unsure about how to deal with this situation. Indeed, I was in the middle of the “situation” before I realised it. What made me most uncomfortable was the effort Diane made to obtain my home address, ostensibly to send me written documentation. I had not elicited this documentation and the only address she had for me was in care of the university. She also sought to meet me socially for a drink when she next visited the city. Initially, the overwhelming emotion I felt was that of bewilderment. I simply did not know why she was telephoning me, and I was deeply uncomfortable with what I felt was an intrusion into my personal life. I was also unhappy with the escalation of the frequency of the calls, and there seemed to be only a tenuous link between the original research and the actual subject of these calls. But I felt that I could not simply ask Diane to stop. During her interview I had successfully developed a rapport with her, one which facilitated the disclosure of intimate details from her personal and professional life. This rapport was genuine and I was sorry for her because of her ongoing experiences at school. Critically, I also felt a duty of care towards Diane given that she had generously shared her distressing life history with me and, in so doing, assisted me with my research. At a most basic level, my own sense of personal and professional responsibility was impacting on how I viewed her increasingly uncomfortable behaviour and, more importantly, how I reacted to it. It would be a complete exaggeration to say I was frightened by Diane’s behaviour; I was not. However, I was uncomfortable with it and its arbitrariness. Ultimately, there

was no dramatic denouement to the story. Once I began blocking her calls, they ceased. I have had no contact with Diane since.

Of the 24 people interviewed for this study, 22 became visibly distressed during their interviews. This, however, is not to suggest that the other two individuals were unmoved, rather that they contained their emotions during the time it took to complete the formal interview. On three occasions, interviews had to be suspended in order to allow the participants to compose themselves. For me, this proved unsettling as I was acutely aware that the act of recounting their painful experiences of bullying had provoked or triggered their distress. Furthermore, their upset was “contagious” and I struggled at times to maintain my own detached (professional?) self-control. Vignette 2 details one such instance and my own reaction to it.

Vignette 2: Protecting the Researcher

As with Diane above, Ann collected me at the train station and welcomed me warmly into her home with tea and cake. She had experienced an ongoing campaign of workplace bullying at the hands of her school principal. As a direct result of the bullying, Ann left the school in question and moved to another area. The physical distancing of herself from the abuse and abuser, however, had limited success, and Ann suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of her experiences. She spoke candidly with me for two and a half hours about this deeply distressing time in her life. She then insisted that I join her and her daughter for a lunch that she had prepared for the occasion. In contrast to the formal interview, the conversation during lunch was light-hearted and casual, revolving around her daughter’s school work and the likelihood that she would attend university. On dropping me off at the station, Ann embraced me warmly and indicated that, should I need to, she would be happy to speak to me again. She then thrust a bag of wrapped sandwiches into my hands for the train journey home. It was as if the process of telling her story, and having it received respectfully, had artificially deepened and intensified our “relationship” though we were, in reality, strangers.

This “stranger’s” story did affect me, however. The empathy that had developed in the comparatively short, but intense, interview was genuine. I did more than record her story; I experienced it with her. Watching her cry in her own sitting room, listening to her describe the ritual humiliation she encountered in her place of work, and seeing her hands shake as she recalled the vitriolic abuse at the hands of her school principal, impacted upon me deeply by drawing me into the narrative. I became a participant in both her story and her storytelling. And I felt angry. On the train journey home, I re-ran the different episodes she had recounted, like rewinding a film or TV programme. With each “rewinding,” I became more incensed. The sheer injustice and unfairness of her experiences disturbed me profoundly, as did my own inability to “make it better.” This impotence made me feel frustrated and helpless, as if, in some way, I had let Ann down. I knew there was no logic to my train of thought. I knew that I had done nothing wrong and that I had acted appropriately during and after my interview. I had never seen my role as being other than a detached researcher. I had travelled to her home to ask her questions about workplace bullying, and my sole intention was to gather the data, provide her with referral details for counselling and support services, and leave. I possess neither the skills nor experience to “make it better.” I knew all of this, but that did not make me feel any better. I felt a kind of disconnect between what I *knew* and what I *felt*.

But pragmatism played no role in my response to Ann’s experiences. The intimacy of the rapport which had developed between Ann and me transcended normal relational boundaries. I had not remained detached; I had become engaged with the story and personally involved. As a result, I was upset. Deeply upset. As the train approached

my home station, my overriding feeling was one of uncertainty. I felt as if I had done something wrong. I had crossed a line. But try as I might, I couldn't work out how I could have avoided it or, indeed, what this line was or where it was sited. I also realised that I would have to be particularly cautious and vigilant that I analyse and parse Ann's story with the same level of detachment as I would the others, even though it affected me deeply.

Two incidents then arose which, though minor in themselves, highlight the unpredictable nature of research with human subjects, particularly when the focus of the research is a highly personal or sensitive topic. Although I had received comprehensive training from my university in research methodology and my ongoing supervisory support was outstanding, I was still a relatively inexperienced researcher. Nevertheless, no training or guidance can prepare a researcher for all eventualities. Life experience and the maturity of years were the only tools available when unexpected incidents arose and I was obliged to respond swiftly, appropriately, and professionally.

Vignettes 3 and 4: Preparing for the Unexpected

The first incident took place following a presentation I had given on the preliminary results of my study. During the presentation I mentioned, in passing, that one of the interviewees had blamed his diagnosis of cancer on workplace bullying. I provided no names or identifying details and did not mention the teacher's location, age, family status, among other identifiers. After the presentation, the senior academic who was chairing the session spoke to me and attempted to identify the teacher in question, speculating as to who he may be. My initial response was one of panic. I was terrified that I had inadvertently revealed the teacher's identity (I had not) and I was also, momentarily, left speechless by the questioning of the chairperson. I knew *she* had crossed an ethical line by asking the question in the first place, but her position within the academic hierarchy was assured and I was a novice. I responded to her in a less than coherent manner that I couldn't divulge the identity of the interviewee. Perhaps realising that she had overstepped her position, the chairperson muttered an apology and left. Once again, I was left confused and uncertain as to whether or not I had acted appropriately and ethically.

The second incident demonstrates the futility of attempting to anticipate or pre-empt all eventualities. Having travelled a considerable distance to interview two participants, I booked into a city centre hotel. That night, while crossing the hotel's foyer on my way to my room, I ran into another interviewee to whom I had spoken some weeks previously. She was from a completely different part of the country and, at her interview, had made it clear that none of her family knew that she was taking part in the study. Indeed, as per her request, we conducted the interview at a restaurant some distance from her home. However, as she crossed the foyer towards me I could see that she was accompanied by her husband and teenage children. We made eye contact and, given the expression of panic on her face, I passed her as I would a stranger—without any acknowledgement or sign of recognition. As I got into the hotel elevator, my heart was pounding. No lecture or book could have prepared me for such an unexpected incident. Nonetheless, that evening I was wholly convinced of the need to address the possibility/probability of such incidents arising when researching "real people." How to do this was the challenge.

Discussion

Researching distressing, sensitive topics can prove traumatic for both the researcher (Elmir et al., 2011; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008) and the researched (Hynson, Aroni, Bauld, & Sawyer, 2006; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010). Although traditionally the focus has been on the strategies that

researchers must undertake to protect the research participants (Basit, 2010; Creswell, 2009), there is a recognition that researchers too need to recognise the potential effect that the research may have upon themselves (McGarry, 2010) and should formally consider occupational health and safety issues when designing research projects (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008; Walls et al., 2010). The detrimental effect of research on the researcher may be profound (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006), particularly as it often entails considerable tension between the personal and professional elements of the researcher's life as he/she attempts to maintain a professional distance during intensely personal encounters with the interviewees (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002; Haynes, 2006).

From the above four vignettes a number of key themes emerge. Each of these will now be considered in turn.

Exiting the Researcher/Interviewee Relationship

Researchers, particularly those researching sensitive topics, are often conflicted upon having completed their fieldwork (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006). Whereas initially the researcher may experience a sense of relief that the data has been gathered and the next step in the research process has begun, feelings of guilt and vulnerability soon manifest, as the researcher attempts to re-negotiate his/her relationship with the subject(s) of the enquiry (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is critical to the success of the project (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). However, it is inherently artificial and premised, in part at least, on the desire to obtain high-quality, useable data (Rapley, 2001). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have acknowledged the contrived nature of the interviewer/interviewee relationship and suggested that it is characterised by “a sad and wistful sense born of the possibility of temporariness” (p. 72). This “temporariness” is at the heart of the author's ethical dilemma. How is it “enforced”? Indeed, is it appropriate to be even considering the notion of enforcing a time-limit on such a relationship? If effective rapport development, which is seen as being so critical to successful interviewing and data gathering, is to take place, how can a researcher, particularly a novice researcher, place a temporal limit upon it?

Perhaps due to the emotional and deeply personal nature of narratives, interview participants may easily mistake the relationship for something that it is not (Watson, 2009). As detailed above, Diane in particular, attempted to prolong the researcher/participant relationship well after the initial interview. It may be argued that Diane ascribed a mistaken meaning to the interaction that took place between us and, in so doing, misjudged a professional relationship for a personal one. As a result, she came to consider me to be a confidante, friend, or therapist. The question as to how “complicit” I was in unintentionally creating such expectations is critical. From the interviewee's perspective, had an expectation of intimacy been created? If fault is to be apportioned, where does it lie? And would placing a time-limit on the relationship prior to the interview compromise the depth and intensity of the interview data by undermining the development of a sincere rapport? This is the moral dilemma for the researcher—how to foster a trusting and empathetic relationship with complete strangers over a short period of time and, once the research is complete, leave that relationship honourably without causing further distress to the subject? This also raises the issue of the exercise of power within the relationship (Foucault, 1998), in that the researcher seeks to control the entry into, and exit from, the relationship. This undermines the notion of the interviewee as an agentic being, casting them instead as “docile” (Foucault, 1998) and malleable within the context of their interaction with the researcher. As Sollund (2008) argued “power fluctuates between the two parties, both try to steer the other” (p. 184). The actions of Diane may be seen, in this context, as an attempt to reclaim her own agency through resistance. In other words, by refusing to acquiesce to a formal ending of the relationship, it may be argued that she was exercising, or perhaps reclaiming, her own power.

Protecting the Researcher

Any research that involves the participation of human subjects requires consideration of the potential impact of that research on all those involved (Cohen et al., 2007; Elliott, 2005). The importance of protecting the interviewee/research participant from harm has been recognised (Clark, 2006; Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005) and researchers are required to ensure that, at the very least, research participants should not be worse off at the end of the research process than they were at the start (Hynson et al., 2006). In this study, and reflecting the notion of stories being deeply inscribed within the body (Foucault, 1980; Vickers, 2007), all but two of the original research participants became visibly distressed during the interviews while they recounted their experiences of workplace bullying.

However, while recognising the critical importance of safeguarding the well-being of research participants/interviewees, it is also essential to acknowledge (and, indeed, forestall) the potentially harmful consequences of the research process for the *researcher* (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; McGarry, 2010; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). Indeed, Hughes (2004) has argued that researcher safety should be recognised as a key area of methodological concern and identified risks as being either physical (violence), psychological (vicarious traumatisation), reputational (allegations of professional misconduct), and/or general (accidents, infections, etc.). Such experiences on the part of the researcher can result in burnout (Goodrum & Keys, 2007), secondary traumatic distress, and compassion fatigue (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006).

The act of interviewing must be seen as a mutually participatory event (Owens, 2006) and the researcher considered as a co-constructor in the narratives, occupying a dual position as both a researcher and research subject (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009). Researchers, therefore, are not mere passive, detached observers/recorders, and their own legitimate engagement with the research subject's personal testimony may trigger an emotional response which, in itself, is traumatic and upsetting. This may be considered a type of referred distress or vicarious traumatisation. Vicarious traumatisation is the notion that, in the process of witnessing or researching distressing or traumatic stories, researchers themselves may experience the distress at second hand (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006; Schauben & Frazer, 1995).

The gathering of the data proved particularly taxing for me, and I was unprepared for the impact the process would have on me personally. In common with the conflicted experiences of other researchers into sensitive subjects (Bloor et al., 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008), the experiences recounted during these traumatic interviews was also felt by this researcher. In Vignette 2, for example, I detail how I replayed Ann's story in my mind, becoming angrier and angrier with each revisiting. The depth of the trauma was not in any way comparable to that of Ann, but it existed nonetheless and was experienced again following the interviews with several of the other research participants. Indeed, on reflection, the fact that I am also a teacher may have increased my sense of fellow-feeling or empathy with the interviewees and, perhaps, magnified my own reciprocal emotional reaction. Nonetheless, the whole experience, and my response to it, was unexpected and there were no formal structures to prepare me or help me manage/process my feelings afterwards.

Preparing for the Unexpected

Fieldwork is, by its nature, unpredictable. Consequently, it would be impossible to prepare for every eventuality because, when dealing with human subjects, there is always a possibility for those persons to act in an unpredictable and unforeseen manner (Morrison, 2006). In practice, people say and do things that are unanticipated and, in many cases, unanticipatable. While the strength of qualitative research is that it is flexible enough to capture such behaviour (Mertens, 2010), it can pose challenges for researchers, particularly novice researchers, as to how best to manage such conduct (Hughes, 2004). In the third vignette, the behaviour of the conference chair was both inappropriate and surprising. I was not prepared for it and was

unsure how to process it afterwards. Similarly, with meeting the interview participant in the hotel lobby, there was no way of knowing that such an event could arise. From my perspective, this incident disrupted my anticipated, and in retrospect unrealistic, interview programme and forced me to question my own nascent professionalism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a recognition that the skills necessary for effective interviewing go beyond the ability to ask “good” questions and switch on/off a recording device at opportune moments (Owens, 2006; Roulston et al., 2003). Interviewing is a challenging activity which requires a high level of expertise and competence (Hynson et al., 2006; Mertens, 2010). This is particularly true when interviewing people about distressing or sensitive subjects (Elmir et al., 2011; McGarry, 2010). The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is in itself complex (Owens, 2006) and, though premised on an artificial rapport, is characterised by an intimacy that belies the actual duration of the association (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). What became apparent during the course of this study is that the impact of workplace bullying on individuals can be profound (Duffy & Sperry, 2012; Fahie & Devine, 2012) and the revisiting of these experience during the course of interviews can prove traumatic, both for the interviewer and interviewee (Goodrum & Keys, 2007; Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). The vicarious traumatisation I experienced personally was unexpected and related to the blurred positioning and boundaries of the researcher in such relationships. Indeed, ineffective boundary management may have contributed to misunderstandings/misinterpretations of usual relational limits and controls.

It has been argued that the sensitive nature of such research deepens the emotional connection between the two parties, as both co-construct the narrative history (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Mallozzi, 2009; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). The interviewer is not a passive observer but an active participant (Clark, 2006; Sollund, 2008) and, in such a way, the interviewer can experience the trauma vicariously. A number of factors have been identified that can mitigate the impact of the traumatisation on the researcher. These include experience, the researcher’s own personal history and coping skills (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006) as well as training (Bloor et al., 2008).

In light of the above, a number of recommendations may be offered, the first of which relates to protecting the researcher. The interviewer must formally consider potential problems that may arise and how they will deal with them (Morrison, 2006). While acknowledging that pain and trauma can offer transformative learning opportunities, nonetheless there is a need to anticipate any possible dangers that may arise when conducting research, particularly for women in terms of personal safety (Walls et al., 2010). Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) have argued that the carrying out of a formal risk assessment, which considers the physical and emotional risks associated with undertaking the research, must be part of the preparation for every study. There are a number of practical steps any researcher could take in order to ensure personal safety. These include:

- Refraining from disclosing personal details like home addresses or other private contact details.
- Ensuring that interviews are carried out in public places and informing another adult of your location and return time.
- Using dedicated mobile phone SIM cards for the research, which are to be destroyed afterwards.
- Monitoring carefully the interview to assess the emotional impact and response of the interviewee.
- Discussing the research process with a supervisor/mentor/colleague on a systematic basis as a means of debriefing and understanding what has occurred.

The risks to the researcher transcend physical risk, however, and this article highlights the emotional/psychological risks to the interviewer, particularly in the context of vicarious traumatisation (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006). An awareness of the potential for this to occur, and a focussed preparation/anticipation for it in the event that it does, must be central to any research proposal. It may also be useful if institutional review boards or ethics committees consider the impact of the research on the researcher and assess the proposal in terms of how the researcher proposes to circumvent or resolve such issues. Nevertheless, I am, at the same time, disinclined to make more complex the increasingly byzantine bureaucratization of the researcher's journey towards institutional ethical approval. A level of pragmatism would have to be applied here.

Secondly, mentoring/supervisions (Clarke, 2006), peer support (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007), and even group psychotherapy (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008) have all been suggested as a means of addressing the impact of sensitive researching on researchers. In this context, Zurbriggen (2002) and Johnson and McLeod Clark (2003) have detailed the importance of support networks, self-care, and reflexivity as a means of self-protection. Although different methods may suit different contexts, "critical friends" (Costa & Kallick, 1993) or skilled helpers (Egan, 2002), who facilitate the researcher in regularly and systematically debriefing and processing the traumatic testimonies, may prove particularly useful (Elmir et al., 2011). This may also serve to lessen the sense of vulnerability and isolation felt by many researchers. However, what all of these techniques have in common is their retrospective quality, and they are in no way anticipatory of the potential difficulties. This, again, points to the central role of preparation and ongoing supervisory support.

Finally, reflexivity is key to the development of a level of self-awareness of the impact of such stories on the researcher (Lipscomb, 2010; Mallozzi, 2009). This places some of the responsibility for their own protection onto the shoulders of the researchers themselves. Journaling or diary keeping allows the researcher to be both part of, and detached from, the research process at the same time and, therefore, able to develop a deeper understanding of what has happened and its emotional impact on themselves (Bloor et al., 2008). Regular, structured, critical reflection fosters good practice and encourages researchers to consider their own position(ing) within the research process. By so doing, the researcher can avoid, what Possick (2009) calls, "emotional enmeshment." This is also particularly important for relational boundary management and has implications for the smooth exiting of the researcher relationship (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). Reflexivity encourages self-care and personal responsibility; it heightens awareness and, ultimately, improves professional practice (Lipscomb, 2010; Mallozzi, 2009; Possick, 2009). It is important, however, that this reflexivity is structured, systematic, and critically, acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations—both positive and negative—which are inherent within the research relationship (Paechter, 1998). The exercise of power is tempered by resistance and challenge, both at a conscious and unconscious level, and while power dominates and controls people, knowledge and truths (which are realised through resistance and a resultant shift in power relations) are, in essence, emancipatory and set people free (Foucault, 1998). Providing interviewees with a voice to articulate their, sometimes, distressing stories is a privilege. It is incumbent on researchers, both novice and experienced, to ensure that their research journey is ethical, methodologically sound, moral, and ultimately, honest.

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